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SUBJECT: MARADA'S FRANJIEH CALLS FOR INDIRECT NEGOTIATIONS  
WITH ISRAEL

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Marada leader Sleiman Franjieh reported to the Ambassador on February 2 that he had established a rapport with Prime Minister Saad Hariri, whom he described as "a man you can deal with." Franjieh, a strong Syrian ally, expressed his support for indirect negotiations between Lebanon and Israel in tandem with the Syrian track. In such negotiations, the pro-Aoun opposition leader argued, Hizballah's weapons could be used as a strong negotiating card with Israel and prevent Palestinian resettlement in Lebanon instead of in a Palestinian state. Franjieh urged privatization of the electricity and telecommunications sectors in addition to linking Lebanon to regional countries to import electricity. He voiced support for several proposed reforms to the electoral law and described a civil state is being in the best interests of Lebanese Christians in the long term. End Summary.

#### A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH HARIRI

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¶2. (C) Despite the tense political atmosphere that prevailed in Lebanon following the 2005 assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri, Franjieh established a rapport with new PM Saad Hariri during cabinet formation negotiations, he told the Ambassador on February 2. As a result of this rapprochement, relations between the Sunni population of Tripoli and Christians from Franjieh's home district of Zgharta had improved tremendously, Franjieh reported. He praised Hariri as "a man you can deal with," but he assessed that the PM made a mistake in sponsoring a March 14 gathering at the Bristol Hotel on January 31 because such a partisan activity undermined him as a national figure. The February 14 commemoration of Rafik Hariri's assassination, which was announced at the Bristol, should be organized by the Hariri family and not the March 14 alliance, Franjieh asserted, so that all parties could participate in remembering a national martyr. If Hariri sponsored a non-partisan event on February 14, Franjieh argued, he would still have leeway to participate in a formal March 14 coalition rally on March 14.

#### SUPPORT FOR INDIRECT NEGOTIATIONS WITH ISRAEL

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¶3. (C) Franjieh, a close friend and ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, expressed his support for indirect negotiations between Lebanon and Israel. But, he noted,

Lebanon should maintain unity with a Syrian track in its peace talks with Israel since Lebanon could not sustain a peace treaty unless Syria also signed a peace treaty with Israel. Otherwise, he argued, "Lebanon will pay the price if Syria signs a peace treaty independently from Lebanon."

#### USE HIZBALLAH'S WEAPONS AS A BARGAINING CHIP

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14. (C) The Lebanese state should have the monopoly on weapons, Franjieh underscored, but he felt that Hizballah's weapons could be used as a strong negotiating card with Israel and play an important role in preventing Palestinian resettlement in Lebanon. Noises made by "some parties" about Hizballah's weapons while those same parties ignored Palestinian weapons inside the refugee camps indicated bad intentions, Franjieh believed. "Such arguments imply that the main aim is to disarm the Shia and keep Sunni weapons to impose a Palestinian resettlement by force," he said.

#### PALESTINIAN STATE IS THE SOLUTION TO PALESTINIAN PRESENCE IN LEBANON

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15. (C) The Palestinian presence in Lebanon remained his main concern, Franjieh emphasized, and he pointed to the creation of a Palestinian state as the best solution to the issue. "Palestinian demography scares not only Israel but us also. Creating a Palestinian state would dissipate these fears," Franjieh explained. Not all Palestinian refugees would return to such a Palestinian state, he admitted, but he argued that Palestinian refugees remaining in Lebanon would

be treated like any citizen of a foreign country residing in Lebanon. Those who obtained permission could also immigrate to third countries, he said. The living conditions of refugees must be improved, he added, but he underscored that the government must create economic growth first.

#### PRIVATIZATION KEY TO GROWTH

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16. (C) Franjieh expressed his support for privatization in general and called for privatizing the electricity and telecommunications sectors. He further advocated linking Lebanon to regional countries in order to import electricity. Lebanon should buy electricity cheaply from Syria or Turkey, he said, instead of producing it domestically using expensive and polluting fuel oil. He also supported changing Lebanese laws in order to attract foreign investments, which in turn could provide job opportunities for youth.

#### SUPPORT FOR ELECTORAL REFORMS

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17. (C) The voting age should be lowered to 18, Franjieh argued, despite the "opposition of my ally, Michel Aoun." Opposing lowering the voting age to 18 is like "hiding behind your finger" since those citizens would be voters in a few years, he pointed out. Establishment of a full-fledged civil state should precede political deconfessionalization, he advocated, although he pledged his support for abolishing political confessionalism. A civil state is in the best interest of Lebanese Christians in the long term, Franjieh maintained, despite the possibility that initial stages of the process could be appear to disadvantage Christians.

18. (C) With regard to the cabinet discussion over revising the municipal electoral law, Franjieh said he had asked his Marada representative in the cabinet, Minister of State Yussef Saadeh, to propose dividing Beirut into three electoral districts, the same way Beirut was divided in the parliamentary elections. PM Hariri,s opposition to the proposal was unjustified, Franjieh complained, because Hariri had accepted the concept of division in the parliamentary elections. Under the plan, he said, each of three districts would elect eight members to the municipal board and the mayor would be a Sunni in order to allay Hariri,s concerns.

"Dividing Beirut would ensure that all communities would be represented on the municipal board," Franjieh argued.

¶9. (C) Franjieh ruled out reconciliation with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea since "the people are not ready for such a process." Nevertheless, he allowed, the ground could be prepared for such a move in the future if neither the Lebanese Forces nor Franjieh's Marada raised controversial issues at the political or media levels.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: This meeting was our first with Franjieh in over a year. Despite his position as the leader of a small regional party, he played a key role in negotiating a solution to last fall's cabinet formation crisis and he has avoided ideological battles. While Franjieh is primarily concerned with the issue of Palestinian resettlement in Lebanon, his opinions on regional peace negotiations are, of note, given his close alliance with Syria. He was direct and thoughtful throughout the conversation.

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